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# *Reimagining the Human in Contemporary French Science Fiction* by Christina Lord (review)

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Proust, Stendhal, and, perhaps above all, Montaigne, whose intellectual curiosity, open-mindedness, and playfulness he extols.

The third section focuses on French literature and culture. Montaigne's lessons in self-awareness, mental agility, and resistance to dogma, Molière's philosophical boldness and transgression of the aesthetic standards of his time in *Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre*, and the sardonic bitterness and subversiveness of Voltaire's *Candide* mobilize Brombert's attention as do the combination of skepticism and enthusiasm in Stendhal, the images of Paris in Baudelaire, the dialogue of thought and action in Malraux, and 1889, the year of the Eiffel Tower and the centennial of the French Revolution. Insightful remarks abound: on Don Juan's modernity, for instance, on humidity in *Les Fleurs du mal*, or on the polarization between 1789 and 1793, the taking of the Bastille and the Terror.

A single essay constitutes the final section of *The Pensive Citadel*. In it, Brombert records some of his thoughts at his retirement party—the beginning, as he quipped, of a «Permanent Sabbatical»—and recalls various junctures in his life, including his realization in the fall of 1945 that a life of studying and learning in the midst of books was the kind of life he aspired to have. He meditates on the afflictions of age, the end of the sabbatical, and his love of life.

Brombert knows how to convey his view of life as a privilege. His profound attachment to great works of literature, his gentle humor, the ease and clarity of his prose shine throughout the book. *The Pensive Citadel* is a pleasure to read.

*Gerald Prince, University of Pennsylvania*

Christina Lord, *Reimagining the Human in Contemporary French Science Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2023, 208 pp.

Christina Lord's outstanding book offers an insightful exploration of contemporary French science fiction and the perpetually shifting conceptualizations of the human subject made possible through the genre's encounters with nonhuman alterity. From J.-H. Rosny's turn-of-the-century *merveilleux scientifique*, to the grandiose, sci-fi blockbusters of Luc Besson, Lord engages with a thoughtfully selected corpus of novels and films that complicate the divide between the human and the nonhuman. While her excellent close readings certainly do justice to the wide range of stylistic devices and conceptual tools

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employed across these works, one of the primary innovations of Lord's book is its ability to convincingly organize her corpus' varied reimaginings of the human into two distinct strains of thought: those of posthumanism and transhumanism. Throughout her book, Lord considers how interweaving lines of posthumanist and transhumanist thought underlie contemporary science fiction's negotiations of what it means (or what it *could* mean) to be human in the Anthropocene, an epoch that paradoxically, as Lord underscores, "raises the human to a geological, powerful force yet participates in a discourse of doom" (114) regarding humanity's power to adapt and survive on a planet ravaged by anthropogenic change.

Lord's introduction efficiently establishes her broader engagement with science fiction scholarship, environmental humanities, and postmodern philosophy while deftly defining her key terminology. As she points out, it is not uncommon to find the terms poshumanism and transhumanism used almost interchangeably in the scholarship (5)—matters are made only more nebulous when one considers their different usages across Anglophone and Francophone contexts, as well as across the different disciplines of philosophy, literature, and environmental studies. Her introduction thus does a great service in clearly articulating useful distinctions between posthumanism (which emphasizes the interdependence of the human and nonhuman within a complex ecosystem, extending a type of considerability to nonhuman Others) and transhumanism (which emphasizes the reimagining of the human with an eye towards a mastery over nature), offering in the process a valuable framework with which to evaluate French science fiction's myriad human/nonhuman encounters (4).

Lord's introduction then provides a compelling rationale for her chosen corpus. As she points out, the word *science-fiction* does not appear in French until around 1950 (15), and while there are numerous precursors to which one could point (from Cyrano de Bergerac to Jules Verne), it is not until J.-H. Rosny, Lord argues, that one can speak of a literature that takes seriously fiction's ability to engage with scientific thought to imagine a radically non-anthropocentric alterity. Indeed, Lord opens her introduction with a reference to Bernard Blanc's call for a shedding of the Vernian yoke in French science fiction, with Lord going so far as to trace a throughline between Jules Verne's techno-optimist, emboldened explorer stories and the private billionaire space races of the 21st century. Though much of her corpus focuses on novels and films of the past thirty years, the project's first chapter thus begins in 1887 with Rosny's *Les Xipéhuz*, a novel that establishes the type of challenge

to a "false ontological human/nonhuman dichotomy" (17) that will play out in the four chapters of her project.

Chapter one thus sets up many of the central questions that Lord will explore, focusing on a collection of three Rosny novellas that she brings together as his "Anthropocene Saga." Turning to the prehistoric drama of *Les Xipéhuz* (1887), the near future spacefaring of *Les Navigateurs de l'infini* (1925), and the future, apocalyptic extinction of all human life in *La Mort de la Terre* (1910), Lord offers a sophisticated close reading of a series of Rosny novellas that, taken together, span the entire Age of Anthropos. Drawing heavily from Emmanuel Levinas' theorization of the face of the Other, Lord examines Rosny's pointedly non-anthropocentric lifeforms like the crystalline Xipéhuz or the iron-based *ferromagnétaux*, creatures presented as potential usurpers of Anthropos' privileged but precarious spot atop the Anthropocene throne. Lord succinctly highlights the tensions that emerge between posthumanist and transhumanist impulses as Rosny's human characters strive to find a balance between empathetic coexistence with and technological mastery over a natural world that, most saliently in *La Mort de la Terre*, grows increasingly inhospitable to the human as a direct result of anthropogenic climate change.

If the transition from Rosny in Chapter one to Éric Chevillard's *Sans l'orang-outan* (2007) in Chapter two might initially feel jarring in its century-long jump, Lord makes an excellent case for reading in Chevillard an exaggerated, often comically absurd continuation of the type of human/nonhuman negotiations to be found in Rosny's "Anthropocene Saga." Chevillard's experimental fiction may be *prima facie* closer in temperament to the *nouveau roman*, Absurdism, and other 20th-century experimental forms than it is to the late 19th-century *merveilleux scientifique* of Rosny, but it is precisely these absurdist, experimental anchors, Lord argues, that allow the novel to make the loss of the titular orangutan felt so urgently in the first place, and to then alternate so breathlessly between posthumanist and transhumanist solutions in its efforts to revive the extinct orangutan, whether in spirit, in flesh, or even, strikingly, in hybrid human/orangutan flesh.

Chapter three marks a pivot to human/machine hybrids, focusing on Jean-Claude Dunyach and Ayerdhal's novel *Étoiles mourantes* (1999). Lord's cyborg analysis is wonderfully executed—if the cyborg, as a human/technology hybrid meant to enhance natural human capacities, should at first read as the most transhumanist of creations, Lord makes a case for the "posthumanist cyborg model of Dunyach and Ayerdhal," whose transhumanism ultimately gestures towards a posthumanist ethic in which "technology becomes a tool

for making connections with the Other rather than simply acting as a tool for mastering (or completely discarding) the body" (96).

This discussion of cyborgs then sets the stage for Chapter four and the Harawayan cyborgs that Lord detects in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Lucy* (2014). Lord's application of Donna Haraway's feminist cyborg theorization is excellent, underscoring the blurring of ontological boundaries (man/machine, man/animal, man/woman) made possible through Besson's female cyborg protagonists and their subversion of the camera's male gaze. Lord's conceptual framing is compelling, but the chapter occasionally lacks some of the nuance to be found elsewhere in the book—outside of her inspired engagement with Haraway, Lord's primary feminist anchor is Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*, but one would love to see what she would do with a more sustained dialogue with more contemporary voices in ecofeminist scholarship, particularly as the reader would be forgiven for hesitating to see in Besson (whose on and offscreen treatment of women comes with some significant baggage) an uncomplicated exemplar of feminist filmmaking.

As Lord underscores in her conclusion, science fiction is only just beginning to receive the critical attention it deserves in French scholarship, and her book thus offers a valuable contribution to the field. Lord's analysis provides an elegant framework for grappling with the tensions between posthumanist and transhumanist thought in the genre, and the book is a well-argued joy to read—it will surely prove engaging to any scholar interested in the development of science fiction.

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